DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 295 CS 202 705

AUTHOR Hairston, Maxine C.
TITLE Carl Rogers' Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Composition Skills (Literary); *Educational Alternatives; *Empathy; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Personality Theories; *Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS *Rogers (Carl)

ABSTRACT

Carl Rogers' approach to communication has implications for the rhetorician and the teacher of college composition. The qualities of respect, restraint, neutrality, and understanding, when applied to written and oral discourse, can provide an effective alternative to polemical argumentation. The detatchment and empathy of the Rogerian style is particularly suited to the needs of students who have mastered the rudiments of composition skills but who need to examine their thinking, attitudes, and assumptions more closely. Similarly, Rogers' model encourages open-mindedness, a nonjudgmental focus, and eliminates the tendency toward bias to which students are prone. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122295

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maxine C. Hairston

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Carl Rogers' Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric

Maxine C. Hairston

At the outset, I want to acknowledge my debt to Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, in whose book Rhetoric: Discovery and Change I first encountered the concept of the non-threatening argument and first read Carl Rogers' article, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation." In that article Rogers theorizes about the ways in which the approaches developed in client-centered therapy could be used to solve communication problems that develop between individuals or between groups. The basic premise of the article is, like most important truths, very simple: you do not convert people to your point of view by threatening them or challenging their values. This elementary insight into human behavior has profound implications for rhetoric, and I feel that any theory of persuasion must take it into account. In their book Young, Becker, and Pike have combined this premise with tagmemic theory to construct a humane rhetoric that has as its goal cooperation and communication rather than intimidation and coercion. In my own work I introduce the Rogerian approach to argument as a supplement to traditional Aristotelian rhetoric, pointing out that in certain situations it may work when most conventional strategies fail. Such situations almost always involve only two people or groups; they are not those in which the arguer is ostensibly talking to an opponent but is really addressing a third audience such as readers or television viewers.

Ironically, those situations in which the classical methods

CS202705

of using proof, evidence, and logical deductions are most apt to fail are just the ones we care about most. Such arguments often concern issues that affect us deeply--racial and sexual matters, moral questions, personal and professional standards and behavior. Where there is dispute about this kind of issue, communication often breaks down because both parties are so emotionally involved, so deeply committed to certain values, that they can scarcely listen to each other, much less have a rational exchange of views. At times like these most of us, sensing that hostility and anger are very close to breaking through, back off and say, "Well, there's no use arguing." Yet when we care about issues, we would like to talk about them and get others to see our point of view. Often we need very much to discuss serious problems with our family, friends, or colleagues but feel that any effort to communicate is doomed because both sides are too emotional and sensitive for calm discussion.

To break the stalemate in situations like these Carl Rogers suggests that we can do two things which he, as a therapist, has found helpful in opening up communication and resolving conflicts. First, we can scrupulously avoid using evaluative language; second, we can listen to each other with understanding and acceptance. Such advice at first seems too trivial and simple-minded to be of much help when people are feeling tense and hostile towards each other, and too vague and pious to be of any specific value when one wants to persuade another on an important issue. But such injunctions are neither trivial nor pointless as Rogers explains in his article, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation."

There he points out that the chief impediment to real communication between people is the tendency we all have to react to value statements with other value statements. For example, if someone remarks to you, "I thought Nashville was a fine movie." your first impulse is probably not to ask him why he liked it, but to offer your own opinion: "Yes, wasn't it good?" or "Oh, I was very diappointed with it." As Rogers puts it, "Your primary reaction to any statement is to evaluate what has just been said to you, to evaluate it from your point of view, your own frame of reference." It seems to be almost human nature that we can't hear an opinion without wanting to give one, however trivial the topic. This kind of reaction may seem so routine, so natural and familiar, that we think it is harmless, but it's not. Value judgments tend to freeze people into the status quo and make them commit themselves to a stand, and almost inevitably, once a person takes a position on an issue, even one so trivial as the merits of a movie or of daylight savings time, the possibility of his listening to a dissenting point of view with an open mind diminishes. Instead of wanting to hear both sides, he goes on the defensive and becomes more concerned about justifying his own opinion than in understanding someone else's point of view.

If we unthinkingly throw up this kind of barrier to communication on relatively unimportant matters, how much more likely we are to do so on issues that touch our basic values and interests. These kinds of defensive attitudes make a discussion between children and parents about social problems or one between husband and wife about personal problems painful and often futile. To quote Rogers again,

> Although the tendency to make evaluations is common in almost all interchange of language, it is very much heightened in those situations where feeling and emotions are deeply involved. So the stronger our feelings, the more likely it is that there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings, two judgments, missing each other in psychological space.[1]

It is at this point of communication breakdown that rhetoricians can learn something from psychological research.

Therapists have learned from their research that when they are trying to help a person solve personal problems or just cope with life more effectively, simply pointing out to a client that his attitudes and behavior are undesirable and should be changed helps that client very little. In fact, such a value statement may have an adverse effect because the client, instead of being receptive to the criticism, feels threatened by it and clings to his defensive behavior all the more closely. Yet many of us follow precisely this pattern when we try to persuade people to change their minds. We tell our children "You're crazy to think about majoring in philosophy." or we say to our colleagues, "You're wrong about wanting to require two semesters of composition, and here is why." And we expect people to listen to us and respect our wisdom even though we pay no attention to their opinions or feelings.

This brings me to the second point in the Rogerian approach to argument: listening with understanding. Although pointing out the error of their ways to clients in therapy does not usually help them, what <u>does</u> help them is getting acceptance and understanding from the therapist. When a client feels that the therapist is making a serious and genuine effort to empathize, to enter into his world in an interested, but non-judgmental way, then he may accept the

possibility of change. And when a person with whom we have a difference of opinion feels that we really understand why he feels as he does, there is a possibility that he may change his mind. Empathy is the key. Rogers says,

> Real communication occurs and this evaluative tendency is avoided when we listen with understanding. What does that mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.[2]

He suggests an experiment:

> The next time you get into an argument with your wife, or your friend, or with a small group of friends, just stop the discussion for a moment and for an experiment, institute this rule: "Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that speaker's satisfaction." You can see what this would mean. It would simply mean that before presenting your own point of view it would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker's frame of reference--to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him . . . Once you have been able to see the other's point of view, your own comments will have to be drastically revised. You will also find the emotion going out of the discussion, the differences being reduced, and those differences which remain of a rational sort.[3]

Now obviously this approach is time-consuming and not practical in some situations, but the implications of trying to be this fair-minded with one's opponent are staggering. Just the attempt to make such a summary would be an invaluable exercise for any of us, but particularly useful for a young writer who has had almost no experience in making an objective and accurate statement of someone else's ideas. And cultivating the habit of understanding the opposition is useful in traditional argument as well as in low-key, non-threatening discourse. As John Stuart Mill has pointed

out, "He who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that."

The person who takes the time to listen attentively to someone else's ideas shows that he respects that other person, and accepts him as a worthwhile individual. This acceptant attitude is crucial to Rogers' formula for establishing communication, and equally crucial to writing or speaking when one hopes to come to an agreement. If you expect to reach any agreement with someone else, you must credit your opponent with being a rational, intelligent person of good will. If there is not mutual respect, little can be accomplished. Students need to learn that in writing or speaking, this respect is conveyed by a tone of restraint, candor, and courtesy.

Now all this noble sounding talk about respect, restraint, neutrality, and understanding does not mean that an argument simply becomes a love-fest, and that the parties to a dispute compromise and agree on everything. People can have strong opinions and work hard to persuade other people to accept them, but still stay within the non-threatening framework. The guidelines that I suggest for conducting this kind of argument--that is a discussion in which each person states his beliefs and supports them--are the following.

1. Give a brief, objective statement of the issue under discussion.
2. Summarize in impartial language what you perceive the case for the opposition to be; the summary should demonstrate that you understand their interests and concerns and should avoid any hint of hostility.

3. Make an objective statement of your own side of the issue, listing your concerns and interests, but avoiding loaded language or any hint of moral superiority.
4. Outline what common ground or mutual concerns you and the other person or group seem to share; if you see irreconcilable interests, specify what they are.
5. Outline the solution you propose, pointing out what both sides may gain from it.

If you proceed along these lines, you can come close to demonstrating the concern for the other person's interests that Rogers recommends in the experiment he suggests above.

Rogers' strategy for improving communication was developed principally in small face-to-face encounter groups and one to one conversations between client and therapist. There is no reason, however, why it cannot be adapted to broader and less personal situations and to written as well as oral discourse. More about the latter possibility in a few minutes. As for the practicality of moving from establishing a useful exchange of views in a small group to a larger context, in the following passage Rogers himself hypothesizes that what they have done in the therapist's office might be transposed to an international level. He says:

> Even with our present limited knowledge we can see some steps which might be taken, even in large groups, to increase the amount of listening <u>with</u> and decrease the amount of evaluation <u>about</u>. To be imaginative for a moment, let us suppose that a therapeutically oriented international group went to the Russian leaders and said, "We want to achieve a genuine understanding of your views and even more important, of your attitudes and feelings, toward the United States. We will summarize and resummarize these views and feelings if necessary, until you agree

> that our description represents the situation as it seems to you." Then suppose they did the same thing with leaders in our own country. If they then gave the widest possible distribution to these two views, with the feelings clearly described but not expressed in name-calling, might not the effect be very great? It would not guarantee the type of understanding I have been describing, but it would make it much more possible. . . . The dropping of some defensiveness by one part leads to further dropping of a defensiveness by the other party and truth is thus approached.[4]

Rogers' large-scale vision may not appeal to your freshman or may strain their credulity too far to impress them with its possibilities. You could, however, dramatize the different effects produced by the Rogerian approach to debate and the traditional approach. Have the students in a composition class isolate for discussion an issue on which feelings run high; the merits and defects of socialized medicine would make a good topic. Almost certainly you will have some zealous pre-med students in the class and probably some students who are the children of doctors and thus well-versed in arguments for private medicine. Probably you will also have someone who has recently had a large medical bill in his family or, in the abstract at least, thinks that the government should provide national low-cost health care just as it provides highways and courts. Divide the students into the opposing groups and get each side to write down the strongest arguments they can think of for their side, then set up a public debate to present those arguments. After each side has had a chance to present its case, take a poll to see which participants in the debate have changed their minds. You can be virtually certain that no one will have budged. Rather the clash of opinions will probably have caused each side to solidify its views. Uncommitted spectators may

have been swayed by the argument to adopt one view over another; those involved will not.

As a contrast, get two more sets of volunteers to present views on another controversial issue; this time it might be the merits of busing or the environmental impact of a proposed expressway or sub-division. Have each group work out a statement about the problem, following as far as possible these guidelines that I have already described. Undoubtedly these groups will have more trouble than the others did presenting their cases because most of the time our instinct is to clobber our opponent rather than try to understand him. But with some help and encouragement they ought to be able to put on a convincing Rogerian tableau. Afterwards, take another poll of attitudes and you may find that some have changed. At least both participants and spectators should see possibilities for change whereas in the previous situation no such possiblity existed.

Rogers himself would probably think that his communication techniques are not readily transferable to written discourse because he puts a great deal of emphasis on interaction between the parties in a discussion, stressing that as one person understands another's position, he continually revises his own view. The relationship is a dynamic one, growing and changing as each person gradually relaxes his barriers and develops more trust; or the relationship can stagnate quickly if one person introduces a threatening element into it. In other words, we cannot plan actual strategies or rehearse what we are going to say because we don't know how the situation is going to develop. The key element is attitude; the

rest is unpredictable process.

I think, however, that even though written discourse is subject to certain restrictions and lacks the flexibility and vigor of an actual dialogue, we can use Carl Rogers' approach to rhetoric in composition because the attitude is transferable, and it is the attitude that is the unique and crucial element. In fact, we less controlled people who do not have the patience and forebearance of a trained psychologist may handle a non-threatening argument better in writing than we would in direct conversation where body language and nuances of speech convey more than we really want them to. Also, since one can delete, edit, and rewrite in a paper he should be better able to preserve the accepting, non-judgmental attitude that this approach demands.

The problems a writer faces in writing an argument that follows the guidelines I outlined above go back to the problems of rhetorical stance. The first challenge is that of, without fakery or hypocrisy, projecting a persona that inspires trust and acceptance. The writer must have strong ethical appeal; Rogers labels this quality "congruence," that is, being comfortable with one's self in the role one has assumed. The attitude that one projects and the tone one conveys are, of course, a function of the persona, and thus the writer must communicate a neutral, accepting, and open character to the reader--not easy to do in writing. He must also somehow signal his respect for the reader.

Second, the writer must make a sensitive analysis of his audience, strive almost literally to see the issue from the other person's point of view. In Rogers' words, "Can I step into his

private world so completely that I lose all desire to evaluate or judge it?" To achieve this kind of understanding and make the reader feel it, one must have what might paradoxically be called a compassionate detachment. Again, not an easy quality to convey in writing.

Third, the write must present his own side of the issue with such restraint and tact that the person reading the argument will not feel threatened by either the information or the language. Doing this requires using descriptive rather than evaluative language and stating one's points as hypotheses or opinions rather than as assertions. Young, Becker, and Pike suggest "provisional writing," using a tentative, unassertive tone.

Fourth, the write must suggest a reasonable solution that he believes both parties can live with.

The freshman who could handle all this while he is also struggling with all the more routine problems of composition would be some kind of miracle man, and one can expect the average writer to achieve only a modest success with the approach Rogers suggests. For one thing, as even a naive student will quickly realize, the therapist's techniques are very difficult for the average person to put into practice. We're not conditioned to be open minded and fair; we're conditioned to win. Also, as Rogers points out, trying to see another person's point of view takes more courage than many of us have. He writes,

> If you really understand another person in this way, if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality.[5]

The Rogerian approach also requires a maturity and detachment from self that taxes a professor, much less a student.

Because Rogerian argument does require some capacity for detachment from at least one party in an exchange of views, one has to concede, I think, that there are situations in which it will not work. For example, a person who believes that abortion is murder will almost certainly not be persuaded to abandon that fundamental a priori premise by even the most tactful and understanding rhetorician. Similarly, the person who harbors deep hostilities toward certain ethnic or religious groups is not likely to give up those hostilities unless concrete experience convinces him of their irrationality. But then traditional argument does not work with this kind of audience either. The situations in which the Rogerian approach is most likely to work are those in which both parties have the same basic value system, but differ on ways of achieving those values; for example, choosing a college, making career choices, or planning a budget.

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties it presents and its limited application--it's really effective only with small audiences that one knows well and to whom one is speaking or writing directly--I think the Rogerian approach to communication is worth teaching, particularly to good students who have mastered the rudiments of writing clearly and coherently and are ready to move on to more complex considerations. These are the students who need to be examining their thinking, their attitudes, and their assumptions. Some of the best of them may have starred on high school debate teams and thus thrive on controversy. They love arguing and are good at writing witty, sarcastic attacks against sacred cows or setting up

straw men and demolishing them with invincible logic. No teacher would want to repress their enthusiasm but a little exposure to Carl Roger's thoughts on communication might set them to thinking about how much they are really accomplishing with their debate techniques. They might even become aware that they are performing principally for themselves; such a realization can be the beginning of rhetorical wisdom.

Another group of student writers who need the therapy that trying to write a non-threatening, open-minded paper will give them are those who habitually write hundreds of words of conventional pieties or self-congratulatory prose. They are writing not to convince any audience of anything, but to impress the teacher or their classmates with their laudable sentiments. Challenging these students to write value-free statements, to suspend judgments and try to present an issue objectively and without prejudice, to put communication before vanity, may be the most useful thing that anyone does for their thinking during their entire freshman year.

Another advantage of using Rogers' model for communication is that it gives students an incentive to prune connotation and bias from their language and to get rid of adjectives that load their assertions and adverbs that block impartial reasoning. It will help them to realize that a prose that is comparatively free of qualifiers is stronger than that which leans on modifiers. Remembering this caution will help a writer's style even if he despairs of ever being mature enough to practice Rogers' suggestions consistently.

Probably none of us, students or professors or even practicing therapists, is ever good enough (in both senses of the word) to make Carl Rogers' insights into rhetoric and human behavior work for us very often, but I think we gain a little every time we try once more even though we fail most of the time. We increase our awareness of language and its potential for both good and harm; we increase our awareness of our biases and prejudices and perhaps decrease some of our defensiveness. We gain a little more understanding of some of the people who oppose us and we probably try a little harder to accept them and find some common ground with them. And that's progress, for as Rogers says,

> If we are thoughtfully trying to understand our tasks as administrators, teachers, educational counselors, [and] therapists, then we are working on the problem which will determine the future of this planet. For it is not upon the physical sciences that the future will depend. It is upon us who are trying to understand and deal with the interactions between human beings--who are trying to create helping relationships.[6]

References

1 Rogers, Carl. "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation," paper presented at the Centennial Conference on Communications at Northwestern University, 1951; reprinted in Carl Rogers, On Becoming A Person, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1961, p. 331.

2 Ibid., p. 332.

3 Ibid., p. 331.

4 Ibid., p. 335.

5 Ibid., p. 333.

6 Rogers, Carl. "The Characteristics Of A Helping Relationship," paper presented at convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association in St. Louis, 1958; reprinted in On Becoming A Person, p. 39.

References

1. Rogers, Carl, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation," paper presented at the Centennial Conference on Communications at Northwestern University, 1951; reprinted in Carl Rogers, On Becoming A Person, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1961, p.331.
2. Ibid., p. 332
3. Ibid., p. 331
4. Ibid., p. 335
5. Ibid., p. 333
6. Rogers, Carl, "The Characteristics Of A Helping Relationship," paper presented at conventions of the American Personnel and Guidance Association in St. Louis, 1958; reprinted in On Becoming A Person, p. 39